

GRAUSTARK

...By...
GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

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He looked at his hands and saw the black stains from the charred letter, last evidence of the crime against the state. A tender light came to his eyes, and he kissed the sooty spots, murmuring her name again and again. How lonely he was! How cold and cheerless his cage! For the first time he began to appreciate the real seriousness of his position. Up to this time he had regarded it optimistically, confident of vindication and acquittal. He grew cold and shuddered instinctively as he realized that his position was so critical that the princess had deemed it necessary to resort to stratagem.

"Obey!" whispered Quinnox, his face aglow with pleasure, his finger quivering as he pointed commandingly toward the letter.

"Obey what?" asked Lorry dully.

"The last line!"

He hastily reread the last line and then deliberately held the precious missive over the lamp until it ignited. He would have given all he possessed to have preserved it. But the last line commanded, "Burn this at once and in the presence of the bearer."

"There!" he said regretfully as he crumpled the charred remnants between his fingers and turned to the silent watchers.

"Her crime goes up in smoke," muttered Dangloss sententiously.

"The princess commits no crime," retorted Quinnox angrily, "when she trusts four honest men."

"Where is she?" whispered the prisoner, with thrumming ears.

"Where all good women should be a 9 o'clock-in bed," replied Dangloss shortly. "But will you obey her command?"

"So she commands?" asked Lorry, smiling.

"We obey her," said Quinnox, "and she said the same thing."

"And for that reason?" asked Lorry.

"But can this thing be done?"

Without necessitating explanations any possible complications? I will not obey if it is likely to place her in an embarrassing position."

"She understands perfectly what she is doing, sir. In the first place, she has had my advice," said Dangloss, the good old betrayer of an official trust.

"You advised her to command you to allow me to escape?"

"She commanded first, and then I advised her how to command you. As plain as day, she declared war a thousand times over, but you will be safe. That's all we—I mean, all she wants."

"But I cannot desert my friend. How is he to know where I've gone? Will not vengeance fall on him instead?"

"He shall know everything when the proper time comes. And now will you be ready at the hour mentioned? You have but to follow the instructions—I should say, the commands—of the writer."

"And be free! Tell her that I worship her for this. Tell her that every drop of blood in my body belongs to her. She offers me freedom, but makes me her slave for life. Yes, I shall be ready. If I do not see you again, good friends, remember that I love you because you love her and because she loves you enough to intrust a most dangerous secret to your keeping, the commission of an act that may mean the downfall of your nation." He shook hands with them fervently.

"It cannot be that, sir. It may cost the lives of three of her subjects, but no man save yourself can involve the princess or the crown. They may kill us, but they cannot force us to betray her. I trust you will be as loyal to the good girl who wears a crown not upon her head," said Dangloss earnestly.

"I have said my life is yours, gentlemen," said Lorry, "and I could but throw myself at her feet. I must see her before I can do anything without telling her what is in my heart!" he added passionately.

"You must obey the command," said Dangloss, "and the transaction ends now," said Quinnox firmly.

"This escape means, then, that I am not to see her again," he said, his voice choking with emotion.

"Her instructions are that you are to go tonight, at once," said Dangloss, and the black-eyed soldier nodded confirmation.

The prisoner paced the floor of his cell, his mind a jumble of conflicting emotions. His clinched hands, twitching lips and half-closed eyes betrayed the battle that was inflicting him with its carnage. Suddenly he darted to the door, crying:

"Then I refuse to obey! Tell her that if she permits me to leave this hole I shall be at her feet before another night has passed. Say to her that I refuse to go from Graustark until I have seen her and talked with her. You, Quinnox, go to her now and tell her this, and say to her also that there is something she must hear from my own lips. Then I will leave Graustark, and not till then, even though death be the alternative." The two men stared at him in amazement and consternation.

"You will not escape?" gasped Quinnox.

"I will not be dragged away without seeing her," he answered resolutely, throwing himself on the bed.

"Confounded young ass!" growled Dangloss. The soldier's teeth grated. A moment later the door closed softly, a key rattled and his visitors were gone—messengers bearing to him the most positive proof of devotion that man could exact.

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spread the face of the man as he pointed to the letter and then to the lamp. There was no mistaking his meaning. Lorry reluctantly held the note over the flame and saw it crumble away as had its predecessor. There was to be no proof of her complicity left behind. He knew it would be folly to offer a bribe to the loyal guard.

After this very significant act the guard's face cleared, and he deposited his big revolver on the table. Stepping to the cell's entrance, he listened intently, then softly closed the heavy iron doors. Without a word he began to strip off his uniform, Lorry watching him as if fascinated. The fellow looked up impatiently and motioned for him to be quick, taking it for granted that the prisoner understood his part of the transaction. Awakened by this sharp reminder, Lorry nervously began to remove his own clothes. In five minutes his garments were scattered over the floor and he was attired in the uniform of a guard. Not a word had been spoken. The prisoner was the guard, the guard a prisoner.

"Are you not afraid this will cost you your life?" asked Lorry, first in English, then in German. The guard merely shook his head, indicating that he could not understand.

He quickly turned to the bed, seized a sheet and tore it into strips, impatiently thrusting them into the other's hands. The first letter had foretold all this, and the prisoner knew what was expected of him. He therefore securely bound the guard's legs and arms. With a grim smile the captive nodded his head toward the revolver, the lantern and the keys. His obliging prisoner secured them, as well as his own personal effects, and was ready to depart. According to instructions, he was to go forth, locking the doors behind him, leaving the man to be discovered the next morning by surprised keepers. It struck him that there was something absurd in this part of the plan. How was this guard to explain his position with absolutely no sign of a struggle to bear him out? It was hardly plausible that a big, strong fellow could be so easily overpowered single handed. There was something wretchedly incongruous about the—but there came a startling and effective end to all criticism.

The guard, bound as he was, suddenly turned and lunged headforemost against the sharp bedpost. His head, struck with a thud, and he rolled to the floor as if dead. Uttering an exclamation of horror, Lorry ran to his side. Blood was gushing from a long gash across his head, and he was already unconscious. Sicken by the brave sacrifice, he picked the man up and placed him on the bed. A hasty examination proved that it was no more than a scalp wound and that death was too remote to be feared. The guard had done his part nobly, and it was now the prisoner's turn to act as resolutely and as unflinchingly. Sorry to leave the poor fellow in what seemed an inhuman manner, he strode into the corridor, closed and locked the doors clumsily and began the descent of the stairs. He had been instructed to act unhesitatingly, as the slightest show of nervousness would result in discovery.

With the helmet well down over his face and the cape well up he steadily, even noisily, made his way to the next floor below. There were prisoners on this floor, while he had been the only occupant of the floor above. Straight ahead he went, flashing his lantern here and there, passing down another stairway and into the main corridor. Here he met a guard who had just come in from the outside. The man addressed him in the language of the country, and his heart almost stopped beating. How was he to answer? Muttering something almost inaudible, he hurried on to the ground floor, trembling with fear lest the man should call to him to halt. He was relieved to find, in the end, that his progress was not to be impeded. In another moment he was boldly unlocking the door that led to the visitors' hall. Then came the door to the warden's office. Here he found three sleepy guards, none of whom paid any attention to him as he passed through and entered Captain Dangloss's private room. The gruff old captain sat at a desk writing. The escaping man half paused as if to speak to him. A sharp cough from the captain and a significant jerk of the head told him that there must be no delay, no words. Opening the door he stepped out into a storm so fierce and wild that he shuddered apprehensively.

"A fitting night!" he muttered as he plunged into the driving rain, forcing his way across the courtyard toward the main gate. The little light in the gatekeeper's window was his guide, so, blinded by the torrents, blown by the winds, he soon found himself before the final barrier. Peering through the window, he saw the keeper dozing in his chair. By the light from within he selected one that had a white string knotted in its ring. This was the key that was to open the big gate in case no one challenged him. In any other case he was to give the countersign, "Dangloss," and trust fortune to pass him through without question.

Luck was with him, and, finding the great lock, he softly inserted and turned the key. The wind blew the heavy gate open violently, and it required all of his strength to keep it from banging against the wall beyond. The most difficult task that he had encountered grew from his efforts to close the gate against the blast. He was about to give up in despair when a hand was laid on his shoulder and some one hissed in his startled ear:

"Sh! Not a word!"

His legs almost went from under his body, so great was the shock and the fear. Two strong hands joined his own in the effort to pull the door into position, and he knew at once that they belonged to the man who was to meet

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